

A Natural Sanctuary in the Himalaya:

Nanda Devi and the Rishiganga Basin

BY

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(With a map and two plates)

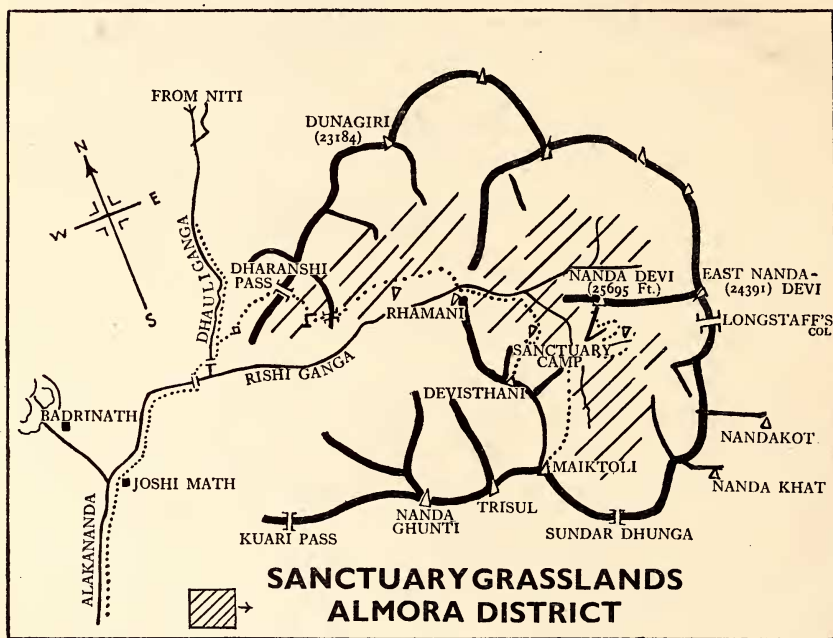
INTRODUCTION

Though I had heard of the natural sanctuary formed by a ring of high mountains around Nanda Devi in 1942, it was only in 1960, and again in 1961, that it was possible to actually visit the area, primarily with the object of mountaineering and photography. The second of these two trips eventually came to be sponsored by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, the Mount Everest Foundation, London, and *The Statesman* newspaper, and the following report is based on information gathered during these two trips.

Nanda Devi is not only the highest mountain in the central Himalaya, but dominates 250 inaccessible square miles of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world. The area around Nanda Devi is ringed by a continuous high ridge which descends below eighteen thousand feet only where Rishiganga River, draining the numerous glaciers of the region, has cut a deep and difficult gorge through the western side. Nineteen known summits of over 21,000 ft. stand on this ridge, which is located between the Dhauliganga and Goriganga rivers of the Kumaun-Garhwal Himalaya.

Much of this 250 square miles of mountainous terrain is alpine forest and pastureland, some accessible alps used by village flocks of sheep and goats, the greatest part the haunt of a wide variety of animals and birds characteristic of the higher Himalaya of the Indian region. The floral abundance alone is astonishing, not only putting the famed Bhyundar Valley (Frank Smythe's Valley of Flowers) into the shade in comparison, but also offering a potential hunting-ground for the

plant-hunter because of its insular virginity. If detailed and expert surveys were carried out in the region, many instructive and useful relationships, ecological and biological, might emerge about environmental adaptation in the complete absence of human influences such as are not possible elsewhere in the higher Himalaya.



It is the purpose of this article to consider a far-sighted plan for preserving this whole self-contained watershed as something more than a Game Sanctuary, which is its present status according to the Forest Department. This may, it will be suggested, be profitably made the first Wilderness Preserve in India, after the pattern adopted in the United States.

HISTORICAL

The Survey of India had always looked upon the gap in their knowledge of this area as more or less inevitable because of its extreme inaccessibility. Light was first thrown on it by men working under the incentive of mountain-climbing and exploration,

W. W. Graham, accompanied by two Swiss guides, Ulrich Kauffman and Emil Boss, was the first enthusiast to try to force the gorge of the Rishi where it meets the Dhauliganga, some fifteen miles above Joshimath on the route to the border pass of Niti. A lone explorer and some hardy sportsmen, who have left no records, were his only predecessors, and he failed entirely in his attempt to traverse the almost overhanging lower section of the gorge, reaching the relatively easier middle-section of the Rishi over the 13,000 ft. high Dharanshi Pass situated on the outer ridge to the north, where it descends from the 23,184-ft.-high Dunagiri Peak. Graham claimed to have climbed Changabang, an extremely difficult mountain above the foot of the toughest portion of the Rishi gorge, from where the Nanda Devi massif is only five miles away.

It was left to Dr. Longstaff in 1907 to make another attempt, and this he did with the Swiss guides, the Brocherel brothers, and General Bruce, of the Gorkhas. He also entered only the easier middle-section of the Rishi, known as the Outer Sanctuary, over the Bagini pass to the north, and though successful in climbing Trisul (23,360 ft.) he too failed to find a feasible route over the last few miles of the Rishi gorge, despite gallant attempts from both banks of the thundering, constricted river.

In 1926, 1927, and 1932, Hugh Ruttledge, I.C.S., then Deputy Commissioner of Almora in Kumaun and a mountain-enthusiast, tried three other approaches to the Inner Sanctuary; from the south and south-west, he was brought up short by the hanging-glaciers of Sunderdhunga Col and the glaciers below Trisul overlooking Nandakini River. From the north-east, up the Timphu glacier, the prospect was no easier and the party abandoned the attempt, Ruttledge remaining convinced of the uniqueness and attraction of the Sanctuary, and equally certain that the Blessed Goddess, Nanda Devi, was then beyond human capacity or endurance to approach because of the obstacles it imposed on its votaries.

It was Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman in 1934 who had the privilege of pioneering a memorable route to the Inner Sanctuary by forcing a passage up the upper Rishi gorge after weeks of effort. They rounded off the trip by descending the treacherous and insecure ice-fall over Sunderdhunga Col to the south which had so frightened Ruttledge. One of their two sherpas, Angtarkey, still recalls that trip with righteous horror not unmingled with pride.

Since that first crossing, a survey party guided by Eric Shipton, and four expeditions to climb Nanda Devi have followed their route;

the French, who lost two climbers, in 1951, Major Jayal, who did not make the summit either, in 1955, and Mr. Gurdial Singh and the writer, accompanied by Major John Dias and others this year, in 1960 and 1961.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND ECOLOGICAL

The central Himalaya can roughly be described as that section lying between the river Sutlej in the west and the river Kali (Mahakali), the Sharda of the plains, in the east. The Goriganga is a right bank tributary of the latter and drains a very large glaciated area. The Alaknanda, of which the Dhauli is a left bank tributary, joins the Bhagirathi at Devprayag to form the Ganges of the plains. The Rishiganga is the major left-bank tributary of the Dhauli and runs roughly east to west, draining the vast system of glaciers within the Nanda Devi area which, including in the term both the Outer and the Inner Sanctuaries, coincides with the Rishi's watershed.

Nanda Devi stands like a reigning deity at the end of the ridge which may be said to represent the shorter central arm of an reversed letter E, the two outer arms representing the high ridges which enclose the inner arm. Two other arms enclose the two outer arms, and Dunagiri and Nanda Ghunti are the western terminations of the northern and the southern arm respectively.

Nanda Devi Khal (19,390 ft.), known popularly as Longstaff's Col because that doyen of Himalayan exploration first climbed it from the east, and Sunderdhunga Col (c. 18,000 ft.) are the only two passes ever crossed into the Inner Sanctuary, but both are out of question for all but expert climbers. The only route feasible is up the Rishi, and this is now fairly beaten up to the foot of the really impassable gorge, known as Rhamani because a torrent of that name joins the Rishi from the right bank there. Beyond this inner gorge lies the Inner Sanctuary, an area of nearly a hundred square miles of mountain and meadowland, gentle grassland, and rugged cliff faces, which is unique even in Himalayan experience, bearing as it does the indications of Divine handiwork. This was *terra incognita* even to the local shepherds and poachers, who would sacrifice the excellent musk-deer and Burrhel prospects inside rather than face either the difficulties and dangers of the gorge or the wrath of the Blessed Goddess who, they felt, would surely punish any such desecration of 'Dev-bhumi' (holy ground) by mortals.

Ecologically, the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, including the Outer Sanctuary, may be divided conveniently into the following types;



The Dibrugheba alp, amid temperate forests of Silver Birch, *Rhododendron campanulatum*, Spruce, and Cypress. One of the most beautiful spots in the Himalaya.



The Inner Sanctuary's grasslands, coming down to the southern Rishi at the base cliffs of Nanda Devi

(Photos : Hari Dang)



The main and east peaks of Nanda Devi. The climbing route used by expeditions lies up the ridge to the right of the main summit, merging into it tangentially.



Some more of the grasslands and mountain-scenery of the Inner Sanctuary

(Photos : Hari Dang)

1. Mixed-Temperate and Temperate forest, growing along hillsides and in sheltered re-entrants and warmer valleys to heights of 12,000 ft. Blue Pine, Deodar, Maple, and Horse Chestnut near the confluence of the Rishi with the Dhauli give way to Spruce, Cypress, Fir, Rhododendron (*R. campanulatum*), and Silver Birch higher up.

2. Temperate scrub continues above the tree-line, occasionally to as high as 15,000 ft., near the snow-line. Dwarf Rhododendron (*R. anthopogon* and *R. lepidotum*) and *Berberis*, *Cotoneaster*, and Juniper are the chief representatives of this class.

3. Alpine pastureland, varying in luxuriance from the lush and succulent, flower-rich alps of the lower areas to the scrawny, thin-soiled growth higher up. This kind of vegetation extends as high up as 18,000 ft., some mosses and pads extending a thousand feet higher in favoured locations, depending upon season and insolation.

In the Inner Sanctuary, especially where Silver Birch stands are few, there are extensive grasslands and excellent soil; villagers working for us have often expressed wistful longing to get their flocks up for the rich grazing, and been treated to cold looks from conservation-minded mountain-lovers. In addition there are miles of snowfields, rock faces, and ice-cliffs, of apparent uselessness yet invaluable as hallowed ground for the ardent mountaineer or nature-lover. Here, too, are lakes that no one has ever seen, hundreds of high and not-so-high mountains no one has ever climbed, passes that have yet to be crossed, and cliffs and valleys that are still sacred to their pristine inhabitants, the Burghel and the Thar, the Snow Leopard and the Musk Deer, and other slippery, lonely-hearted, eagle-haunted crags and pastures, beyond the leap of goat, beyond the gaze of man, that still echo only to the shrill calls of the Monal and the melancholy whistle of the Snow Cock. No village or human habitation mars this pristine wilderness.

FLORA

Lacking expert scientific knowledge, I have not made any wide and detailed observations or checklists, but I have personally seen or photographed, or seen companions photograph over three hundred different flowers, and this in the short period between climbing and travelling.

ANIMAL LIFE

According to the Uttar Pradesh Forest Authorities, the entire area lying between the mountains Nanda Devi, Dunagiri, and Trisul is a

Game Sanctuary, in the sense that no one is permitted to shoot there and shooting-permits are not issued. In fact, this is a 'paper' Sanctuary, like its coeval the Govind Ballabh Pant Sanctuary in the Tons Basin in Garhwal. Both have never been visited or explored personally by the contemporary 'paper' forest officers, nor are likely to be visited in the near future. Poaching on a grand scale is normal in the Tons Basin, and not uncommon in the Rishi Basin. Musk Deer are the chief quarry, hunted ruthlessly and bravely by the poor villagers for the valuable musk-pod, which sells at lucrative rates in the Kumaun and Garhwal fairs. For, strange to relate, the Government has given complete protection to the Musk Deer and yet permits the export of large quantities of musk to dollar areas—at any rate, this was the situation till last year.¹

Burrhel (*Ovis nabhura*) abound all over the less rugged areas of the Rishi Basin, and often even over difficult terrain. Their numbers have dwindled greatly since Tilman and Shipton first saw large herds. This is largely the result of poaching by villagers in the Outer Sanctuary. Still, they are even now excessive for the limited feeding which the pastures offer. Sheep and goats from villages as far away as Wan give Burrhel keen competition, and may be spreading epidemics that might be decimating their numbers unknown to us. The tenet that the wilder the animal the less its resistance to infection from outside is only too true in this case. The Himalayan Thar (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) is a very plentiful game animal in the basin, frequenting the most difficult terrain in the gorge of the Rishi, coming out into the grasslands only in the post-monsoon months for a spell before retreating to overhangs and precipices for the winter. This animal, too, is suffering decimation by meat-hungry villagers armed with new gun-licences. Even without guns, both Thar and Burrhel, more so the former, are vulnerable through their habit of coming to lower rock-faces when the snow lies deep on their summer haunts. Here they are cornered and chased by villagers and actually murdered with staves and spears. The means adopted to exhaust them before administering the coup, are many and ingenious, including lassoing them at night.

Musk Deer are still very plentiful, but are constantly molested, both by shikaris with guns and by shepherds with dogs, the latter being remorseless trackers of this highly odorous creature. Each time we went up the gorge, we met at least one large party of shikaris, who had had consistently successful hunting. One possible cause of the

¹ The export of musk is still unrestricted.—Eds,